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A. M. D. C.



A S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE

SOLEMN DEDICATION

OF THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. CHAD

BIRMINGHAM,

On the Vigil of St. John the Baptist,

MDCCCXLI.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. N. WISEMAN, D. D.

Bishop of Melipotamus.

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SERMON.

ISAIAH LX. 5.—“ *Then shalt thou see, and abound, and thy heart shall wonder and be enlarged, when the multitude of the sea shall be converted to thee, and the strength of the nations shall come to thee.*”

JOY, my brethren, is a treacherous feeling, one which may easily pass the bounds of prudence, and lay open and bare the heart of him who possesseth it, beyond the sympathies, and beyond the assent, of the stranger to its cause. When David danced before the Ark of God,* they who understood not its value, they whose unprophetic eye penetrated not into its mysteries, and estimated not its sublime contents, deemed him but insane, and scoffed at his enthusiasm. And I too may reasonably fear lest if I give vent to those feelings, which this day's festival excites within me I may, by some at least, be hardly

* 2 Reg. vi. 16.

judged as carried away, beyond propriety, by a current of unjustifiable gladness, or of unreasonable hopes. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in God my Saviour. I will praise him in the congregation of his people. I will proclaim his merits and his loving kindness: I will glory in being their object, however unworthy; in partaking thereof, however unfit. And, my brethren, pardon me if the very greatness of the occasion, and the situation in which, by Divine Providence, I am here placed, serve but to embarrass me, and to limit still further my small ability to edify or instruct you. For on the one hand, I cannot turn away from the topic which all around forces on my mind, to indulge in ordinary lessons of duty, or discussions of doctrine. Whichever way I look, I find but one feeling, but one thought—whether it be that my eyes wander over the beautiful forms and fair proportions of this sacred edifice, or that they dwell upon its rich and sumptuous decorations, or that they contemplate the multitudes come from afar to honour God in his new sanctuary, many of one heart and mind, all proclaims the catholic spirit reviving and resuscitating; reviving its own energies, its own pure essential being; resuscitating, from its grave amidst the ruins of fallen cloisters, amidst the silent splendour of desolate, degraded cathedrals, that body of outward symbols, rites, and solemnities, on which it can impress its own heavenly form,

and through which, alone as through its fitting organs, it can live and act among corporeal beings, and influence, through the senses, the hearts of breathing men.

And now, were I but a stranger in this place, methinks I could without fear speak to you more freely upon these topics : I could commend to your brotherly approbation, nay perhaps to your imitation, the generous spirit with which this work was contemplated and undertaken ; the untiring perseverance wherewith it hath been accomplished ; the skill with which it has been designed and executed ; the devout interest which it has excited, the noble munificences which it hath called forth. But although in none of these things I have a part, although I should be in them enumerating only the merits of others, in whose labours I have had no share, yet whose harvest I am reaping ; still I feel that my own sentiments of thankfulness, not as much to those who have done these great things, as to the God that inspired them, and my estimation of feelings to which I have been a witness, might appear, if fully expressed, biassed by partiality, or swelled out by personal considerations.

But yet, my brethren, I feel that at once I am unjust to the cause of our here assembling, and am occupying you with personal considerations unworthy of it. The erection and dedication of a new Temple to the Living

God, is not a detached, unconnected event ; it is not an interest of one place, of one diocese, of one country ; it is a link in a chain, nay rather in a lengthening, and widening web, of providential dispensations : it is but a new germ, or flower, or fruit upon the ever living and ever spreading Tree of Life, the Church which Christ hath planted upon earth ; it is a new manifestation of its vigour, its health, its growing beauty and might : it is a new chord added to the harmonious instrument where-with the Spouse of the Lamb sounds forth his praises ; it is a new point of contact between earth and heaven, a new Tabernacle of God with men. And therefore must every event like this, thrill with more or less of power and feeling, through the entire body to which it belongs ; and excite an interest, far more than commensurate with any apparent claim it may have upon general sympathy.

And in fact, what is the opening of a new Church to the ministration of religious offices, save the opening of another entrance, of a new gate, to that great and universal Church, which on every side, invites men to enter, unto the enjoyment of those blessings which are deposited within it. It hath no court of the Gentiles, beyond which no proselyte that belongs not to a favoured race may enter ; but to the North and South, and East and West it opens wide its apostolic gates, like that heavenly Jerusalem of which it is the fittest type and

emblem, to welcome all that will enter into its holy precincts, and become its children. To it or of it are spoken all the glorious things of God's inheritance, to it is given majesty and power, and glory and beauty, a wide stretching dominion, and an unfailing rule. Wherever men are, they must see its glorious form reared upon the mountain's top, and be able to say: "come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob."* And in every time must be addressed to it words of future comfort, hopes and blessed prospects, even those which fell dull upon the ear of Judea, and which when fulfilled seemed but prognostics of a fuller accomplishment.

Yes, little did Jerusalem seem to rejoice, and slightly indeed was *her* heart enlarged, when the strength of the nations came to *her*, their kings and wise men, when "the multitudes of camels covered her, the dromedaries of Madian and Ephraim,"—but deeply, and widely, and immeasurably, would the heart expand of God's Church, expand with bursting gratitude, with outbreathing joy, with overflowing love, were this scene to be repeated were *this* multitude "this people of the sea, to be converted to her," were "this strength of nations to come unto her," in faith and in charity, even as I speak it now in hope! Oh, since the hour when Augustine set his foot as its apostle upon this island, there have been, it is

true, bright and glorious days in its annals; the sun hath shone upon deeds of prowess and of virtue almost unparalleled in other lands, on victory in the field, on wisdom in the council, on holiness at the altar, on perfection in the cell. It hath seen the foundations laid of many huge and matchless piles consecrated to the living God, and watched their growth for ages, till after a length of days the cross brilliant in its beams at last crowned the aspiring pinnacle, and then a new cycle of renovation commenced, of embellishment and enrichment of God's house. But far, far brighter will that day be than any that have shone before it, far goodlier and holier will the land appear, when (should God in mercy grant it) error and dissensions shall yield their place to truth and unity; when not the material edifices of churches made with hands, but the heavenly Church of the heavenly King, shall descend, decked out as a bride prepared for her spouse, and occupy the breadth and length of the entire land.

It is then because occasions like this, are as renewed auguries of such a blessing, it is because edifices like this are symbols of that more splendid building which God hath founded here below, it is still more because the ardour and devotion with which you have crowded to its solemn dedication, feelingly stir the mind to imagine what such festivities once were, and again might be, that I feel myself carried forward from the contemplation of

the present to the reflection of the past, or the hopes of the future ; willing to consider to-day's event, as a possible element of connexion between the two.

They who have fallen upon evil times will generally find in the past but a bitter food—regrets for the good things which are fled, repentance for the evils which have brought down their present curse. But in the future they will find an unmeasured, an exhaustless resource : in that they will seek for nourishment. They may become visionaries if they only gaze and long ; they may realize their own predictions, if these animate them to exertion. It is not, then, by helpless inactivity that I call upon you to hope for better things ; it is not by sitting down, and desiring, and prognosticating, that I think you may bring about a brighter future : but it is by steadfastly watching the course of Providence, by studying its forms of grace, at the present moment, and humbly, but vigorously, striving to second them.

And thus let us look at the course of events, into which our meeting this day enters as one, and see towards what it may direct us. It is not many years since the noble and feeling offices of our holy religion, just emerged from painful concealment, were stripped of every unnecessary rite, were confined to the most straitened space, and were destitute of all ornament, of all splendour, beyond their own essential, and unalienable beauty.

The interior of our chapels, bare and unembellished, contained no more than sufficed for the performance of our religious acts ; their exterior was hardly marked by any distinguishable symbol of catholic belief ;—the very cross seemed but timidly placed upon their summits. Gradually, efforts have been made to pass from this state of abasement to one worthier of our religion and of our condition ; our churches have assumed a form which at once fits them for their purpose, and precludes their being mistaken for places destined to any other worship. Their proportions have been enlarged, their sanctuaries ennobled, and every essential part more carefully provided. And in addition to this, more attention has been paid to such ornament as becomes the beauty of God's spouse : and as a necessary consequence, more splendour has been thrown around the celebration of the divine mysteries, more solemnity added to the imposing functions and ordinances of the Church. In this course of improvement, have we not here a proportionate step ? where the generous zeal of the people has not been content to see a well-proportioned edifice erected for them, but has carried it forward to completeness in every lesser detail, and superadded rich embellishment, beyond what has yet been seen amongst us ? Now if God seems thus to have gradually inspired us with a love of the beauty of his house, and a corresponding desire to perform with dignity, and consequently to support by devout attendance, the sublime offices of our holy religion, should it not be

our study to outvie one another in the discharge of this duty, to restore to utmost perfection all those sacred exercises which the Church recommends, as well as the feelings which should accompany them; and to go on multiplying, augmenting, and beautifying, to the utmost of our power, our sacred edifices, adding majesty and decorum to the outward form of religion, so to inspire towards it veneration and love?

But this is, after all, only an outward improvement, a type, a symbol of our duty towards the spiritual Temple of God, his Church. If we try to stir one another to emulation in this material order of perfection, if we strive feebly to imitate our forefathers in this their zeal, let us be rivals with them and among ourselves, for the restoration of that virtue, of that system of ecclesiastical perfection, which formerly accompanied the other Catholics of England, do you wish to see your fellow-countrymen, now severed from the faith, brought back to your love, and in multitudes pressing forward to fill the Church, to surprise and enlarge her heart? Be as the little flock, to which it pleased the Father to grant the kingdom, fearless and unwearied in doing good. Let others see you one in faith, but by charity many; exerting an influence over others by the multiplicity of its acts. Revive all those institutions by which human benevolence used to be elevated to the class of the sublimest christian virtue; shew that our Church is that

in which men love one another, and they will recognize in you the true disciples of Christ. Let the rich see that amongst us alone are to be found existing those generous sacrifices for God, those nobler virtues which in past generations astonish them : let the poor find that in the bosom of the Church is laid up for them comfort and sweet compensation for all their earthly trials. In fine, let all men see, that being a catholic, implies that a man is distinguished by every gospel virtue ; is not only honest but charitable ; not only gentle but meek ; not only quiet but humble ; not only chaste but pure ; not only religious but devout ; not only virtuous but holy : and then shall we see how many will run on every side to seek participation in so glorious and so perfect a Church.

But if we study not to acquire this state of religious improvement, if we trust to impressions being produced by our erecting vast and splendid edifices for our worship, and by our more solemn and magnificent celebration of our religious rites ; nay, if we even rely upon the most eloquent explanations or inculcations of our doctrines to the crowds we may attract, not only, be assured, shall ye be deluded of your hopes, but the very stones of God's sanctuary will cry out for vengeance against you, because the more you receive, the more you must yield,—and ye do not, because the more singularly

God goes on blessing you, the more singularly he expects fruit, and he finds it not.

But no, I will not so far depart from the topics of joy which I proposed to myself at the outset, as the only ones befitting the day's solemnity, as to be found uttering denunciations of evil, or imagining the possibility of our incurring it. No: I believe that the catholic spirit is aroused amongst us, ready for its greatest and most majestic efforts. I speak not of its agency in the affairs of the world. I heed not its power or its influence in the concerns of public life: with them I deal not, they become not this place. But I think that among ourselves, a new and longing aspiration is perceptible after the complete restoration and renovation of all that was great and good in ancient times. And were we disposed to be laggard and slow, we should even be pushed forward, by the current which has set in from without, towards Catholic feeling and Catholic perfection.

It is not yet two years, since, on laying the foundation of this church, I addressed many now present, collected on the uncovered area. I then spoke of duties, not of hopes; I dilated upon present advantages not on future prospects; I described this church, as a blessing to the catholic, not as a probable house of refuge to the protestant. Two yet unfi-

nished years! what have they done in the natural world? The trees have hardly sensibly increased in growth or strength, or satisfied the desires of him who planted them: the rocks and mountains have not even slightly altered their rugged features, or been worn smoother by the hand of time. He that was then a youth, is but young still; and the aged man feels not that he is older, or that deeper wrinkles or whiter locks decide his transition to a further stage of his pilgrimage. Two yet unfinished years! what have they done in the social world? The same kings reign, the same states exist: the same peace and the same laws; the same murmurs and the same remedies. And yet in this brief space, the heart of a great nation hath undergone an important, a vital change such as three hundred years have not wrought, on the most solemn and important of all interests—Religion. I will not shut my eyes to the evil any more than to the good: I know that angry passions have been awakened, that religious hostility to us in many never rose so high, never spoke so frantically as now. But this is a necessary consequence, (necessary according to the fatal laws of our fallen state) of a more marked change on the other side. The violence of one antagonist principle only demonstrates the increase of power in the other.

For it can scarcely be denied, that no theory of gradual approach to catholic feelings, in many most opposed

to them, could have proposed results by much so rapid and so complete as have been manifested in the period which I have defined. The two last years have surely seen more open expressions of admiration for catholic practice and catholic belief, more clear and decided condemnations of the original departure from them, more warm and sincere aspirations after a return to them, than three preceding centuries of dark and gloomy estrangement, separation, and schism. If those who have uttered them proceed no further, we have gained immensely: we have gained concurrence of testimony from those who by position are our adversaries, eloquent vindications of our faith and practices, learned and popular appeals to the feelings on behalf of the ancient Church. But I trust that this is but the harbinger of a further and brighter manifestation of truth. The stone that hath been moved, will continue to roll on, without power of control: the waters that have been set in motion will remain agitated even if the breeze that first stirred them shall droop; the seed which hath been cast will spring up, even though the sower should endeavour to dig it up. For I cannot but feel, that this too is but another step in that working of an unseen, divine influence, which is disposing, as it usually does, of man's agency for its own beneficial purposes. That stone which covered the tomb of England's old and true religion I would fain believe that an angel's hand hath rolled away, that, like her Lord and Spouse, she too may rise triumphant and splendid, to reign for ever.

Those waters, a heavenly messenger hath, I hope, agitated ; that not only the first, but every one that descends into them, may find in them health and life. That seed, I humbly trust, the divine husbandman hath scattered, and it will defy his wakeful enemy's attempts to pluck it up. Yes, I will try to read the future in the mercies, as I do the past, in the justice of my God. I will collect every scattered element of hope,—from the desolation of past ages, which in this country hath not as in others, been unto utter waste and destruction,—from the many cheering evidences of the present, which day after day seems fraught with new consolations,—from the boundless resources of the future, which are laid up in the sanctioned efficacy of earnest prayer, in the promised reward of zealous exertion, and in the infinite scope of divine forgivingness, mercifulness and love ; and I will build with them in my heart a sanctuary for praise, for consolation, for trust : and in it I will consecrate whatever there remains to me, in God's good pleasure, of life, or energy, of time or influence, and devote it all to the furtherance of that one great object, worthy not merely of one, but of a thousand lives, the restoration of true faith and religion in this most fair and noble portion of God's creation.

For I believe, my brethren,—and I address you more especially whom God hath placed under the jurisdiction

of this District, whether fellow-labourers, or beloved brethren in Christ, that the dedication of this our Cathedral Church will be then acceptable to God, when accompanied by each of us with the consecration of his heart : if starting a new career of exertion and improvement, with the opening of this, henceforward our Mother Church, we date from this day an epoch in our ecclesiastical history, to be noted by after ages for its bright and fruitful examples of virtue. And surely the inward dedication of the living temple should scarce be less solemn than that of a material edifice. See this goodly building—its walls, like your bodies, have been washed with waters solemnly blessed : they have been anointed with sacred oil like your foreheads ; they have had poured on them the words of benediction ; they have been sanctified by the prayer of the Church. And therefore will men honour them, and deem them holy ; they will hope to find within their precincts comfort and forgiveness, peace, and hope. And will angels look down, with less complacency on him, who, similarly consecrated, shall this day renew, as we do with regard to this Temple, the spontaneous devotion of himself to God, to his cause, to his Church, to his glorious and eternal Kingdom ?

Yes, I trust, my brethren, that our festival this day is shared by many an invisible friend above, who sympa-

thises with our reasonable joy, and unites his voice, whether in supplication or in praise, with ours. Angels are here, guardians of our native land, angels of peace who long have wept over its misfortunes and its losses, over its errors and its blindness, who have hovered round the ruins of its sanctuaries, over the foundations of its altars. And with them what a splendid array of venerable saints, once the boast of our island, the treasure of our Churches, with him at their head whose sacred remains we piously believe to be enshrined upon that altar consecrated under his name—bishops who enriched their own cathedrals with their relics after death, as they had filled them in life with the savour of their holy example recluses and religious, who sanctified while they cultivated every desert, and turned our very rocks into sanctuaries. Still our Fathers in the Spirit, our masters and examplars, they exult with us in a common joy, they cheer us on in whatever we shall attempt for the land dear to their hearts.

And we on our parts, greet and salute you, glorious servants of our common Lord! We claim relationship with you, as members of the same Church, ye of its triumphant, we of its warfaring portion, as observers of the same worship, as holders of the same faith, as anxious to renew the virtues of your days, and the holiness of your lives. Towards you our eyes shall be turned

amidst our labours, in your powerful intercession we will look for support and assistance; to a participation in your glory we will aspire, as the reward and consummation of our efforts.

And Thou, O God of our fathers, whose mercies to us have been so far beyond our deserts, do Thou accept our cheerful homage this day, and deign to look down upon thy holy place! Bless thy Sanctuary, and dwell therein; hear in it the prayers of thy people; let thine eyes be ever open upon it day and night! and if our fathers have sinned against Thee, and we bear, in addition to our own crimes, the heavy burthen of their iniquities, let thy mercy this day consider the ready offerings of our poverty, and accept them in expiation of our and their guilt. Cast back, not ten, but many degrees, the shadow of thy displeasure on the dial, that the days of our joy may be anticipated, that the brightness of thy countenance may shine upon us, that we may be all thy people, entering into thy holy house, and “that we may sing our psalms all the days of our lives in the house of the Lord.” *

* Is. xxxviii. 20.

